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UNCLAS ZAGREB 002171

SIPDIS

PLEASE PASS ESTH OFFICER
DEPARTMENT FOR S/GAC AND EUR/PGI/BRETT POMAINVILLE
BUDAPEST FOR KARYN POSNER-MULLEN

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: KHIV PHUM PGOV HR
SUBJECT: HIV/AIDS IN CROATIA: LOW PREVALENCE AND LOW AWARENESS

SUMMARY AND COMMENT
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¶1. Croatia's few registered cases of HIV/AIDS and low knowledge about the disease and how it spreads translate into an HIV/AIDS strategy focused on prevention and education. Stigmatization continues be an obstacle, as alarmist press accounts beat out a small cadre of dedicated health professionals in dictating the terms of the HIV/AIDS discussion. A long-overdue updated National Action Plan and proposed anti-discrimination law are encouraging signs that Croatia is getting serious about dealing with HIV/AIDS before it becomes a major problem.

¶2. This is the first in a series of three cables looking at HIV/AIDS in Croatia. Reports on Global Fund efforts to expand free, anonymous testing and efforts to combat high antiretroviral drug prices will follow septel. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT

PREVALENCE
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¶3. With just 470 registered cases in a population of 4.4 million, Croatia's HIV/AIDS prevalence is low. Two hundred eighteen individuals currently receive drug treatment for AIDS. Four out of five infected are men. Transmission since 1985 has occurred primarily by sexual contact within the homosexual (38%) and heterosexual (27%) communities; intravenous drug users account for 10% of all HIV infections. Two cases of transmission occurred via blood transfusion in ¶2004. Most reported cases come from large cities; however, large cities also have the best mechanisms for reporting new cases.

¶4. Official statistics likely underestimate the true extent of the problem owing to complicated (but improving) bureaucratic procedures to get confirmed test results and to register a case with the national health system. Whereas patients until recently were given a choice of paying cash for an HIV test or presenting their national insurance card -- with identifying details -- to their care provider, Croatia's health system now allows for free and anonymous testing. Official GoC HIV/AIDS statistics come from drug treatment centers (including needle exchange centers), hospitals, HIV testing centers, and blood transfusion centers.

JOURNALISTS AND POLITICIANS FAIL TO SHAKE PUBLIC APATHY
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¶5. Croatia's low prevalence of HIV/AIDS coexists with sensationalist journalism, silence from political leaders, and indifference from most of the public. Media coverage surrounding a trafficking victim in Mostar (reftel) and a man in Split publicly accused of intentionally spreading HIV brought HIV/AIDS to the headlines just ahead of World AIDS Day 2004. A large daily recently ran a headline announcing that a Split-based herbologist had 'cured' 5 patients of AIDS. A number of NGO-sponsored group discussions and film festivals included speeches specifically criticizing journalists for creating anxieties about AIDS rather than promoting a serious discussion on how HIV is transmitted and how Croatians can protect themselves. Yet whereas alarmism characterizes the reporting on HIV, silence seems more the rule in the political class, as politicians frequently go to great lengths to avoid speaking up on HIV/AIDS for fear of alienating voters. The Church has likewise shied away from speaking out about HIV/AIDS, though some in the NGO community have expressed frustration with the Church's obstructionism in expanding peer education. Tabloid journalism and political silence in general, however, have done little to shake public indifference.

REASONS FOR OPTIMISM -- A NEW NATIONAL PLAN AND ANTIDISCRIMINATION LAW
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¶6. On the occasion of World AIDS Day, Croatia's reconfigured National AIDS Committee convened for the first time all year on December 1 to adopt an updated National Action Plan on

combating the spread of HIV/AIDS. The plan, drafted by the Ministry of Health to replace the previous 1993 version, emphasizes assistance to people living with HIV/AIDS, targeted interventions into at-risk populations, expanded peer education, upping test numbers through voluntary counseling and testing centers, and improved surveillance of how HIV/AIDS spreads in Croatia. The Committee's membership includes a mix of Ministry of Health politicians, immunologists, NGOs, doctors, the UNDP Resident Representative, and a Catholic priest. NGOs and GoC

representatives were united in supporting the updated plan as a positive step towards de-stigmatization and prevention, while stressing that its implementation -- with Global Fund assistance -- had been ongoing since 2003.

¶7. Croatia has no law banning discrimination against individuals with HIV/AIDS; however, the Labor Law provides some protection from discrimination in hiring and firing. Several HIV-themed NGOs recently teamed up with a professor from the Zagreb Faculty of Law to draft a comprehensive anti-discrimination law that would incorporate HIV/AIDS discrimination into a larger disabilities movement. The proposed law would address discrimination in employment, education, welfare payments, and access to legal services while criminalizing mandatory HIV testing and hate speed associated with HIV/AIDS. The law will also ban discrimination based on membership in a risk group or personal connections to an infected person. The NGO consortium believes they have support in the Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights and hopes to have the bill ready for debate by March.
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